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Statement submitted by Equality Now, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Equality Now, an international human rights organization with ECOSOC status, calls on all member states at the 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women to continue their efforts to provide social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. This requires member states ensure that laws are enacted and enforced that prevent all forms of violence against women and girls, ensure legal equality, and bar practices that are harmful to women and girls, such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, and sex trafficking. In addition, states must seek to ensure that women and girls have access to legal systems to seek justice and obtain redress for human rights violations.

One of the key requirements to providing the social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure necessary to empower women and girls is for governments to have a legal system supported by a strong rule of law that ensures gender equality and bars sexual and gender-based violence. For example, laws that hold technological companies accountable for failure to prevent sex trafficking and other forms of online sexual exploitation could create a powerful system for protecting women and girls from sexual violence. As noted in Equality Now's Report, Words & Deeds: Holding Governments Accountable in the Beijing +20 Review Process 2015, although there has been great progress made around the world to eliminate laws that discriminate against women and girls, far too many laws and policies still remain in effect that are insufficient, inconsistent and not systematically enforced, and sometimes, even promote violence against women and girls. Laws and policies that discriminate against women and girls, such as laws that ban pregnant girls from attending school or allow harmful practices like female genital mutilation and child marriage to occur, can have long-term impacts, including on women's ability to complete their education, obtain employment, and access social protections and public services, if they exist.

Even when laws are in place to protect the rights of women and girls, there are still barriers that prevent them from fully realizing their rights and accessing social protections and public services, especially in cases related to sexual violence. As noted in Equality Now's Report, Learning From Cases of Girls' Rights, adolescent girls are disproportionately vulnerable to human rights abuses. At the same time, girls generally lack a support system through which they can protest abuses and attempt to access justice. For example, girls who are victims of sexual violence are often at risk of being re-victimized through the legal system, such as in cases where they are met with dismissive and sexist attitudes from police, medical examiners, prosecutors, and judges. Delays in the legal system can also serve as a barrier for women and girls moving on with their lives. We have had cases where girls have waited for years to receive a final verdict, sometimes for over half of their lives. Another challenge can be found in rural areas, when the nearest criminal court is not always easily accessible to adolescent girls.

Ensuring that a country's legal system is designed to establish gender equality and provide access to justice for women and girls who have had their rights violated is essential to achieving SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions in the agreed upon sustainable development goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. SDG 16 calls upon states to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and to build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. In order to achieve these aims, it is important to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all (Target 16.3); significantly reduce all forms of

violence (Target 16.1); and by end[ing] abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children (Target 16.2).

We call upon member states to uphold their commitments to the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls, including by devoting financial resources to prevention; by repealing or amending all sex discriminatory laws; and by ensuring that laws and policies give women and girls true protection from sexual violence and sexual exploitation and access to justice if gender-based violence, including harmful practices, is perpetrated.